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Identity and Cross-border Student Mobility: The Mainland China-Hong Kong Experience

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ABSTRACT This article is drawn from research in an ongoing multiple case study of the identity constructions of tertiary-level border-crossing students from mainland China to Hong Kong. It begins by outlining the contextual and conceptual background of the study, followed by the presentation and discussion of the three aspects of identity being constructed, including contestation against place-of-origin stereotypical identification, passive resistance against power regulations exerted by the original context and critical critiques of the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese societies. This paper argues that, compared with the Bologna process, the parallel but inverse-directional characteristics of the border-crossing between mainland China and Hong Kong significantly implicate on student mobility across the internal and external European borders, which are greatly influenced by the global context, against a background of the internationalisation of higher education worldwide.

KEYWORDS: student mobility, cross-border, identity, China, internationalisation, higher education

Introduction

The border between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong tends to soften or harden in line with political, socio-economic, and demographic changes on both sides...Since [1997], the border has opened up considerably, but it still operates in a manner more similar to that between nations than between territories within a state (Smart, 2005). The authorities see border control as necessary for the maintenance of one country but two systems (Li, 2010, pp. 320-321).

Both between- and within- country cross-border student mobility has been on the rise at a global scale (Altbach, 2010; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Chapman, Cummings, & Postiglione, 2010; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Powell & Finger, 2013). Among the many impacts that such intensive student mobility has on the ‘student sojourner’ (Kiley, 2003; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) or the ‘student stranger’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), the issue of identity constructions is brought to the forefront in literature about a diverse body of students across Europe, Southeast Asia and Australia (Kiley, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Powell & Finger, 2013). A growing body of

research has investigated such impacts of mobility on both international and internal migrant students (Gu, 2011a, 2011b; Gu & Tong, 2012; Li, 2010; Li & Bray, 2006, 2007; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Powell & Finger, 2013). These studies have primarily focused on 1) the inequalities brought about by such spatial mobility; 2) the push and pull factors that cause such mobility; and 3) the linguistic practices of migrant students and the implications on identities. So far, relatively little attention has been devoted to investigating the identity constructions of students who migrate in 'sibling' contexts or cultures (Gu & Tong, 2012; Zeng & Watkins, 2010), such as mainland Chinese students pursuing undergraduate degrees in universities in Hong Kong (Gao, 2010; Gu, 2011a, 2011b; Gu & Tong, 2012; Lam, 2006). Since cross-border student mobility is rendered one of the most important indicators of 'internationality in higher education' (Powell & Finger, 2013, p. 270), there comes a need to enrich academic understanding of the socialisation experiences of cross-border students in the host universities.

Since its reversion of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, Hong Kong (HK) has become a Special Administrative Region operated under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle, retaining the political, social and economic systems inherited from its colonial past for a period of 50 years (Abbas, 1997, 2000; M. K. Chan & Clark, 1991). The complex linguistic, cultural and ideological differences between HK and China have been extensively studied in research (Baum, 1999; Brewer, 1999; Cheung & Kwok, 1998; Fairbrother, 2003; Flowerdew, 2004), all of which recognises the importance of bridging understanding of cross-border communications including talent flows.

Although research on cross-border education interactions between mainland China and HK has not attracted due attention as that of the Bologna process in Europe (Powell & Finger, 2013), implications drawn from this study can cast light on the Europeanisation process (Altbach, 2010; Altbach & Knight, 2007) whereby the boundaries between borders become fuzzier and yet the intricate differences between nations remain (Delanty, 2006), especially considering the rising centrality of Chinese higher education in the international arena (Hayhoe & Liu, 2010) and the crucial links between Europe and Asia (Brooks & Waters, 2011). This article charts the findings of a study that explores the identity constructions of mainland Chinese (MLC) students in HK universities.

Background and previous research

Research on cross-border student mobility and identity constructions has focused explicitly on adaptation and change strategies (Kiley, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and systemic policy biases that impede social mobility (Powell and Fingers, 2013). In Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) research on European students going on programmes including the Erasmus and the EAP (*Ecole des Affaires de Paris*) programmes, she suggests that the student sojourner's position in time is disrupted by 'a break with chronological linearity and by the discovery of the precariousness of his situation' (p. 16). Hence, 'the metaphorical figure of precariousness, must then learn to manage the

discontinuities inherent to his path' (ibid). Gewirtz & Cribb (2009) note that when human agents try to explore who they think they are, they are often positioned to either identify with one certain group or they construct themselves 'through the notion of what [they] are "not"' (Archer, 2003, p. 158). By actively negating (Torring, 1999) certain aspect(s) of one's identity, the human agent achieves the formation of his/her favoured identity/identities. Hall (1996), on the other hand, contends that identities are often 'positions' (p.6) imposed upon subjects who knowingly accept that identities are merely 'representations' (ibid) which are 'always constructed across a "lack", across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them' (ibid). These are important theorisations of identity upon which this study draws.

Research context and method

The student sojourners in this study are from a multilingual university in HK, which began to recruit MLC students since 1998 but has significantly increased its student intakes from mainland China since 2005 (Li and Bray 2007; Li, 2010).

This research project is a multiple-case study with an ethnographic orientation. The researcher spends six months in the research site, conducting two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews and around 10 focus group interviews (with 4-6 participants each) with around 30 students, collecting their written accounts on social media sites, such as Facebook, and Renren (Chinese version of Facebook), visiting their social activities, e.g. lectures and dinner parties. The researcher makes thick field notes immediately after these social occasions. The interviews, written accounts and field notes constitute a plethora of data.

Data analysis was an iterative process operated in tandem with data collection. A three-stage analytical framework was employed to interpret the data. Firstly, a plenary reading of all transcripts, field notes and written accounts of participants provided a general background understanding (Huberman & Miles, 1994) for upcoming analysis. Then, individual chronological narratives of participants were constructed and put together for a recursive process of comparison, generating common patterns of themes (e.g. shared admiration of the international flavor of HK before arrival) as well as ruptures and inconsistencies (e.g. differential career aspirations), which constitute a collection of 'hypotheses' (Gu, 2011b). Thirdly, the transcripts, field notes and participants' written accounts were surveyed again and literature was consulted for further confirmation, modification or rejections of such 'hypotheses'.

Given space constraint and with a view to fully capturing the richness and nuances of data and accentuating the most critical issues which lie central to this study, in the following, I will report on the narratives of five participants, while the data of other participants will serve as background understanding integral and crucial to the analysis. The findings revolve around three different aspects of identity, including struggles over stereotypical place-of-origin labels, passive resistance and critical critiques. These findings are representative of major themes emerge across

the entire dataset, taking in consideration the diverse demographic variances such as gender, length of stay in Hong Kong, major and provincial places-of-origin.

Struggles over stereotypical place-of-origin labels

Moving from mainland China to HK for higher education, the MLC students' disconnection from the past (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) means that they are now conceived of in a new light. Essentially, some aspects of their identity are given more weight over others. For instance, representative across the whole data set in this study, Elly's remarks of being looked down upon by labourers who are supposedly more lowly located, socially, is a telling indication of the change of 'rules' in the host context.

I somehow feel that I had a strong impression that HK was always speaking about the weaknesses of mainland China. This is something that I often hear, e.g. some *Nong Min Gong* (literal translation: peasant workers, 农民工[1]) would call us *Da Lu Zai* (mainlanders, 大陆仔[2]). You would feel that they spoke with contempt.

The renewed representation of mainlanders as a 'monolithic collectivity of uncivilised masses' (Ma, 2012, p. 177) is here again employed by lowly-regarded menial labourers in HK to derogate Elly and her fellow MLC students as of an inferior status. What is at stake is that their mainlander identity overrides their other identities, such as her cultured upbringing, her status as an educated university student or even her multi-lingual abilities. This place-of-origin mainlander identity is taken up, here, by the local context as a predominant identity marker while her other identities are played down or ignored. Does Elly accept new rules as such? She remarks:

When I hear something like this I feel quite uneasy. I think, you yourself are a *Nong Min Gong* (peasant worker) -- you don't have any culture at all, and you are here to talk about what is good and what is bad in mainland China!

Instead of subscribing to the dividing mainland China-HK identity marker, Elly contests against such discriminations by emphasising the class distinction, i.e. middle-class (students like her) versus working-class (the local HK labourers). She actively protests against the place-of-origin label that assigns her into a less well regarded group—*Da Lu Zai* (mainlanders) and clings closely to the more advantageous middle-class identity.

However, this strategy does not save her from further estrangement or forced 'othering' (Xu, 2011) when she realises the stark contrast between the two versions of HK--the real and the imagined.

Once I had a few friends from the mainland visit me in HK. I brought them to walk along the

promenade at the Victoria Harbour. There were many expats there. People wore smart suits and all that. I felt there was such a big **gap!**...I think I like the HK Island[3] more. But I think those people are too rich, too **high up there**, and they are so **far away** from me, so sometimes I feel isolated and deserted. It is as if when I want to **chat** with those people, I would feel that they have good jobs, like those jobs in the financial sector, and I would feel we don't belong to the same world. But I find their life style quite an ideal one. I think they make a lot of money...I admire that kind of life. But then I feel, I feel that I may not be that type of people. I feel like I cannot **make it there**. I am not studying finance, not that kind of work. It seems the 'local'[4] people are **closer** to me.

In her imagination, HK is a metropolis where people dress in 'suits' and work in high-paid jobs; in her reality, she is in close daily contact with working-class HK people. Her desire for social proximity, manifested by her attempt to 'chat' with those people in the desired HK is however precluded by her subject of studies. Here, 'gap', 'high up there', 'far away', 'make it there' and 'closer' all point to Elly's acute sense of relative distances between her desired version of HK, codified by 'the HK Island' and the reality version of HK that she is immersed in, associated with 'localness', creating a seemingly insurmountable barrier. Elly is now made to realise that resorting to her middle-class identity alone is insufficient in counterattacking discriminations she has been rendered upon. At stake here include the relative urban-rural divide within HK and her less advantageous position in the finely stratified middle-class division of the new context. Within her own construction of HK, areas such as some towns in the New Territories are considered less metropolitan; although she is of a middle-class background, she does not (and may well not be able to) live the more extravagant or high-end styles of life. Here, the location of her institution, the relative position(s) of herself in the middle class division of the HK society seem to play a crucial part when she struggles to define who she is. In this new context, her relative positioning is regulated through a new set of rules; some of which Elly can contest against, while some others she cannot. It is in this process of contestation and realisation that she reaches a more nuanced and realistic understanding of her identities.

Passive resistance

For all MLC participants, coming to study in HK also opens new windows for them to be exposed to different information and worlds of values. However, what emerges strongly across the majority of interviews in this research is that, while acquiring new understandings, they find themselves in growing dilemmas because they realise that reality does not necessarily accommodate their new understandings. Evelyn, for instance, when referring to the Liu Xiaobo [5] event, indicates that she has to *Ming Zhe Bao Shen* (play it safe, 明哲保身) because events such as this one are far too sensitive. She contrasts the media coverage of Liu's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in mainland China (strict censorship) and in HK (a wide range of

coverage) and suggests that she identifies with the street demonstrations of the HK people. She accuses the MLC government's actions as 'repressive means to prevent news from spreading out' (interview) while she identifies the HK people's anger and dissatisfaction with the way the MLC government handles this issue. However, she did not join the demonstrations because she was worried that if she did something too radical and subsequently upset the MLC government she might be banned from returning to mainland China, which effectively means she would not be able to see her parents in China. Indeed, their ties with past histories still exert enormous influence over their decision-making and subsequent actions. This can partly be explained by the unequal power-relationship between the two entities, i.e. mainland China and HK. The MLC government has emerged as the new power centre since handover and exerts considerable power over most important issues in HK, including how to interpret its mini-constitution, the Basic Law, appointing the Chief Executive of and controlling the pace of democratisation in HK (J. M. Chan & Lee, 2008). By merely disallowing some dissidents from crossing the border, the MLC government can successfully silence the MLC students, preventing them from taking 'inappropriate' actions. Hence, although these MLC students are provided with new channels and new perspectives to critically examine what they used to ignore or perceive differently, the old power still regulates their behaviours.

Although Evelyn has to 'play it safe' in order to make sure she can return home, she has thought revolution within her:

I will not take to the street to declare what I am thinking, but I can have my own thoughts and ideas.

Restricted by the external regulating forces conveyed by the MLC government, Evelyn chooses to engage in passive resistance, by means of which she exercises her free will of critical thinking, believing or disbelieving. To her, this event leads her to experience moments of thought liberation. Her identity of being a critical thinker, possessing independent thoughts and free will, is, to say the least, in the embryonic form.

Crucially, her remarks are echoed by almost all participants. For instance, Ruhua, a second year student from northern China, admits that since she took a course on media operations in China, she begins worrying about being deprived of her rights to return to her family. She finds this a horrifying prospect but appreciates the opportunity to conceive things from a brand-new angle. She says,

It is important to have the chance to see China from the perspective not of that of a Chinese person, but of an international citizen. Because of this new perspective, I begin to see things in a different light, e.g. I begin to consider the importance of political reforms in China, on which I would never cast a second thought before (*remarks made at a dinner party*).

Elly adds that after coming to HK, she has now truly understood the meaning of being dialectic because she is shown how to consider issues from different perspectives.

Clearly the MLC students in this study mostly embrace the opportunities offered to them to be exposed to new information (e.g. news about Liu's Nobel Peace Prize), acquire new values and thinking skills (e.g. political reforms, critical thinking) and most importantly, think for themselves. Such a newly acquired identity is celebrated with open arms however constrained by the powerful regulations enforced by the MLC government in the political sphere, i.e. they have had to restrain their 'rebellious' thoughts and beliefs in order to avoid disastrous political consequences.

Critical critiques

Prevalent among the MLC participants in this study is their frequently-made comments about their *Xiao Dian* (i.e. humour points, 笑点) being different from and their lack of shared childhood memories with the local HK students, such as favourite cartoons, food, etc. Lacking in past in connection with the present context pushes some MLC students to assert that 'In HK, no matter what and how hard I try to adapt to it, I am not a locally born and bred; I am forever an outsider' (Elly) and some proclaim that even if they acquire the permanent citizenship, they would always be a 'sojourner', just like a 'hermit crab' (Fei).

The lack of commonly-shared experiences constitutes a deficiency of the newcomers, manifesting a sense of non-belonging. While some researchers may endorse the ubiquity of such feelings of alienation (Karenina-Paterson, 2013; Ward, et al., 2001), an intriguing issue emerges from my data: when comparing HK with other countries that they have been to, e.g. during exchange programmes or internships, these students display much stronger allegiance to identifying with countries such as the US, Canada and Korea. For instance, Fei considers it 'repressive' and 'lacking in senses of freedom' in HK while he feels much more at ease in the States. He said,

In the US, it is much freer... even though we often had to cook for ourselves, we felt we were in control; here in HK, when we cook for ourselves, we feel pathetic and sorry for ourselves. They just feel so different.

In his attempt to trace the root of such differences between HK and the US, Fei maintains that although HK claims to be a place where the East meets the West, the fusion of these two systems does not work well. He finds HK people following rules in rigid manners, as if they were robots. Hence, he declares that HK is a perfect example of *Jiang Diao Le* (literal translation: stiffed out, 僵掉了), meaning it is a failed combination of two different systems.

In a similar vein, Elly emphasises repeatedly that she was much happier in Canada and Korea when she went on exchange programmes because the people there were friendlier and less ‘polite’; she finds the US people more receptive, compared with the indifference of the HK people. Peter commends the academic atmosphere and diligence of students in the Canadian university he went for his immersion programme. He was so fond of that university that he attempted to quit his study in HK and transfer to it but failed due to visa problems.

Importantly, although the MLC students find their lack of commonly shared experiences with local HK students a crucial issue that impedes their integration into the HK society, their critique of the HK society indicates that the more fundamental reasons lie in their dis-identifications with certain aspects of HK systems. However, it appears that such dis-identifications often come into existence or become more salient after these students have opportunities to compare HK with other societies. The initial mobility achieved by their cross-border higher education pursuit becomes an enabler for their subsequent mobility, which is facilitated by the abundant opportunities to go abroad in HK.

Indeed, for most of the MLC students in this study, coming to study in HK has been a highly instrumental and strategic means for facilitating further mobility; in Peter’s opinion, coming to HK enables him to be in control of his final destinations, whether returning to mainland China, staying in HK or going further abroad. Likewise, to Elly, HK has always been a ‘stepping stone’, ‘somewhere in-between’, before she reaches the next destination.

After gaining experiences overseas, MLC students return to HK, feeling more empowered with critical capacity to examine HK from new perspectives, especially an international one. They are now much more mobile than before, e.g. Elly reiterates that she is ‘always on the move’, and she ‘would not stop’ because this is part of her. In other words, mobility, especially international mobility, has now been ingrained in her identity configuration as part of who she is. Because of such a new identity, she regards HK as merely one of the many places she has been to, ‘a place I have spent four years of my life in’.

However, these students are remarkably aware of the instrumental role and importance of HK as a catalyst in making their subsequent mobility possible, e.g. Elly remarks that ‘if it was not for HK, I could not go to these many places abroad, not even in my dreams!’ The bridging role (Cheng, Cheung, & Yeun, 2010; Li, 2010) that HK plays in sending these MLC students further overseas is significant in contributing to the overall identity configuration of these students. While these students take active ownership of their international mobility and construct themselves as critics of the HK social systems, they do not deny that such aspects of their identity originate from the instrumental contribution of HK.

Discussion

This paper critically engages with MLC students’ cross-border higher education pursuits in HK; it elucidates three aspects of their identities which showcase their passive and active contestation

and resistance against stereotypical derogation of the host community and power regulations stemming from their original context, while referencing to the broader international context when they turn back to critique the systems in HK and mainland China. The fluid identity constructions process has been imbued with tensions, retreat, resistance and persistence. Compared with the Bologna process in Europe which mobilises students of diverse ethnic backgrounds across national boundaries in the purpose of strengthening the Europeanisation process (Eder, 2006), the data illustrated in this paper indicate a parallel but inverse-directional process whereby students of a largely identical ethnic background move across a within-country (but *de facto* inter-nation, as indicated by Li, 2010) border between mainland China and HK. In the latter process, issues pertaining to the intersectionality of class and place-of-origin identity, the importance of shared cultural experiences and influences of the global context play crucial roles in the identity constructions of these border crossing students. Such parallel bi-directional contrasts may serve as an important point of reference for Europe, given the close links, both in terms of collaborations and competitions, in higher education between Europe and Asia. This paper argues that it is high time for Europe to take a closer interest in research on cross-border student mobility in the Asian context, especially considering the increasing impacts of globalisation on both within and cross-country borders (Delanty, 2006) worldwide.

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Notes

[1] 农民工 (*Nong Ming Gong*) here means peasant workers, which is a term used in big cities like Beijing to refer to migrant workers from rural areas in China migrating to cities to take up menial and often lowly-paid jobs. In HK, there is no such *Nong Min Gong*, but Elly here is in fact referring to those HK local labourers who have low-skilled jobs, e.g. construction work.

[2] 大陆仔 (*Da Lu Zai*) in this context is a derogatory term, showing contempt and disapproval of people originally from mainland China.

[3] The HK Island is considered by Elly as the 'downtown' area and centre of HK, whereas her own institution is in the New Territories, which is considered more rural and less metropolitan.

[4] 'Local' people here means the grannies and grandpas who sell self-grown fruits and vegetables in wet markets in areas near her home institution.

[5] Liu Xiaobo is a human rights activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. However, news about his award was immediately censored in mainland China. Liu is currently incarcerated in China.

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